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1. So what makes you really proud to be a Canadian . . . eh?

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So what makes you really proud to be a Canadian . . . eh?

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Body

Last week I was wandering a bit aimlessly along a riverbank, searching for some ornamental driftwood, when I stumbled onto a piece about the size of a baseball bat - expertly debarked and carved to a sharp point at either end.

The teeth marks were clearly visible and in distinct patterns, as if a craftsman had used a pair of tiny chisels to scrape away the bark and nibble off the ends like a well-sharpened pencil. All the tooth marks were in a distinct pattern and it seemed this eager beaver had been very methodical in his work, as if he was carving a piece of fine sculpture as opposed to just one of many logs to build his home.

I wondered how far this piece of art had drifted before it came to rest along the bank of the Tidnish River, which flows into the Northumberland Strait about half way between Port Elgin and Amherst.

I've always been rather fascinated by beavers and their dogged construction skills. It seems quite amazing that these little rodents can chop down trees with their teeth, carry mud and stones while swimming and use these basic materials to build super-strong dams and lodges, slapping down the mud with their flat tails. And if somebody wrecks their dam, they'll just run out and rebuild it in a matter of hours. And when people get close, the beavers will use their big flat tails to make a splash as a warning to others.

As national symbols go, I'd say the beaver is still quite fitting as we prepare to celebrate our country's 144th birthday this weekend. These swimming, building rodents played a key role in Canada's early settlement as their silky fur became the basis of trade.

Over time, the image of these hump-backed, big-toothed, flat-tailed critters has been adopted as a symbol of many businesses, organizations, military regiments and of course as the iconic image on our five-cent piece of currency.

You can still see beavers in their natural habitat in places close to Moncton. I was driving along Highway 126 the other day and saw at least two big beaver ponds from the road between Moncton and Harcourt. It's nice to know that one of our true national symbols is still able to carry on without too much interference from us humans.

As Canadians, one of the things we should be proud of is our ability to coexist with nature, even though it often seems that our natural ***environment is a victim*** of progress and development.

So what else should we be proud of on our country's birthday?

I put the question on my Facebook page last week and some friends came out with the usual responses: freedom, kindness to others, music, the arts, great comedians, technology, history and of course, great beer.

We can find all of these things, including the beer, here in Metro Moncton.

Our written history in the Moncton and surrounding region goes back several hundred years and is highlighted by native society, early French settlements, the expulsion of the Acadians, shipbuilding, lumbering, fishing, our role in foreign wars and the continued development that leads us to today.

There are many museums and historic sites around our region that help put it all into perspective: some more well known than others. Fort Beauséjour is always an interesting place to visit, but I also made a quick stop at another out-of-the-way national historic site last week.

Fort Gaspareaux, located near Port Elgin, isn't much more than a vacant lot with a cairn and some old headstones, but the story of this little fort is rather interesting. The fort was built by the French in the 1750s as one of three to protect the Bay of Fundy area from invasion by the British. It was basically a fortified warehouse with a small garrison and some cannons. But it didn't last long.

Immediately after the Battle of Fort Beauséjour in 1755, British Colonel John Winslow took 300 men over to Fort Gaspareaux, which was under the command of a Captain Villeray. According to the plaque on the stone cairn, the French captain had only 19 soldiers in the little warehouse-fort when the British arrived and had no choice but to surrender. The fort near Port Elgin was renamed Fort Monkton and the British moved in. A year later, nine English soldiers were killed in an ambush. The British abandoned the fort and burned it down.

Standing on that same spot all these years later, you can still see the outline of where the fort stood. There's not much other than a few weathered headstones, but I tried to imagine the look on the French captain's face when he saw 300 or so redcoats knocking at the door, and what life might have been like in a fort like this 250 years ago. Places like this can help put history in perspective, but sometimes it takes a bit of imagination.

Today, Canada remains a vast and varied country with a huge land mass, one of the world's most varied climates and amazing beauty from sea to sea.

I think at times we are still struggling with our own national identity and our place in world society between the British and Americans.

We have a global reputation as nice people, something we should definitely try to hold onto, even if it means saying "eh" and "aboot."

We have lots to be proud of, especially here in Moncton as a community that has often defied the odds and found a way to turn things around.

This weekend, Moncton and other communities will celebrate the birthday with big parties full of fireworks and music. One of Canada's longest-running rock bands, April Wine, will headline Moncton's free downtown street party on Friday. The big fireworks show along the riverfront always draws a huge crowd.

Canada Day is a time for celebration, kicking back and maybe reflecting on the past and how we will press forward into the future, one piece at a time.

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